

## **A Masters level profession? The mid-course views of PGCE trainee teachers**

This paper originally appeared on the ESCalate ITE Help Directory

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### **Abstract**

Teaching is on course to become a Masters level profession. The introduction of M-level PGCE programmes and Government ambitions for a Masters degree in Teaching and Learning (MTL) as a future target for all teaching staff, combine to paint a picture of a profession that is undergoing major professional change. Much of the success of such initiatives will depend upon the viewpoints of the trainees completing PGCE courses and entering the teaching workforce over the next five years. The findings of this study present a mixed picture – the opportunity to get an advantage over ‘rivals’ is valued by some; for others a lack of understanding of the assessment framework under which they are studying, and of the ‘bigger picture’ in terms of the intended ‘M-ness’ of the teaching workforce, inhibit pursuit of the available Level 7 credits. Difficulties reconciling the practical and academic aspects are prevalent. What emerges overall is a portrait of new entrants with diverse goals, who view the M-level aspects of the course, at best, for the opportunity they may provide ‘on paper’ to potential future employers. Is this in fact the truth – and do employers really care? Or are trainees overlooking the personal development - additional skills, reflexivity and critical thinking - that lead to the award of M-level credits in the first instance? This study finds that greater information sharing is required if trainees and newly qualified teachers are to attain a mindset which is in tune with the vision of the teaching profession offered by politicians.

### **Introduction**

When the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) came in to effect in 2004, many Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses underwent review (Sewell, 2008). Previously, academic work on such courses was not necessarily at Masters level (M-level) and the re-structuring has led some providers to offer a Professional Graduate Certificate in Education qualification at Honours level (H-

level) *and* a Postgraduate qualification, awarded at M-level, with others choosing to take a single route leading to *either* the Professional or the Postgraduate qualification. The proportions of HE institutions for each category are thought to be 77%, 5% and 18% respectively (Barker, 2008:1). Sewell (2008) describes the variability in such courses and the need for potential trainees to obtain clarity in the award options, the structure of the assessment and the admissions requirements for each institution before selecting a course of study. This is echoed by Jackson (2008) who claims that, although enthusiasm for the Masters level PGCE is in evidence, approximately 50% of those surveyed, when embarking on a PGCE course, were unclear as to what the M-level aspect 'was all about'.

Looking beyond qualification, Jackson (2008) highlights TDA guidance which states that 'to be effective, CPD should... take account of previous knowledge and expertise' and discusses potential issues in schools for newly qualified staff who wish to capitalize on their acquired Masters credits, but for whom opportunities for further study are not readily made available. Until there is a widespread understanding of the M-ness of PGCE courses, and consequently a potential change in the CPD requirements of NQTs, it is possible that some new teachers might 'stall' and lose momentum at this crucial transition phase. Jackson further draws attention to the potential for a 'two tier' structure within teacher training and the possibility of negative perceptions from those staff already working in schools who did not have the opportunity to gain Masters credits during their PGCE and who may feel 'undermined, resentful [or] negative' (2008:1).

Hawley, (in Jackson, 2008), raises a number of other issues, including headteacher perceptions of M-ness and the consequent effects on recruitment; the procedures schools adopt with NQTs in their induction year with regard to career development; and the variation in the number of M-level credits (between 40 and 120) which form part of the M-level PGCE awarded by a range of institutions. All this, he reminds us, is set against the backdrop of a qualification structure which is still 'too fresh' to provide any definite answers for what makes for the most effective practice.

Within ITT, discussion has also encompassed the role of school-based mentors in guiding and supporting trainee teachers in obtaining M-level credits. In an ESCalate ITE M level PGCE seminar, held at the University of Gloucestershire in January 2007 (Escalate, 2007), a number of positive and negative aspects

were identified as potential challenges / opportunities for school-based colleagues. Whilst action research within their classrooms leads to the potential risk of 'exposure' for some, others may use the opportunity to develop their own learning at Masters level and/or carry out research into their own practice. Furthermore, Sewell (2007) argues that school-based staff should be included in the development of any new M-level programme, advising ITT Institutions to '...consult widely before deciding on the final structure. School partners are an essential part in the design process as they will need to reflect these changes in school-based training'.

Jones(2008) argues that the notion of a critically reflective practitioner is already in evidence through current postgraduate professional development programmes, and that a 'collective power of professionals thinking critically will help to develop ideas at all levels and provide the courage to advocate them'. This vision of changing the nature and practices of the school workforce underpinned the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, Ed Balls, announced plans (March 2008) to introduce a new Masters level qualification in Teaching and Learning (MTL). With an aim to continue to change the face of the school workforce, he stated:

*'To compete with other countries we need a world class workforce with great teachers and a premium on great teaching that inspires their pupils every day. Our aim is that every teacher over time should have the new Masters in Teaching and Learning. It will raise the status of teachers and ensure that they get the recognition that they deserve....Our aim is that over time it should be open to all teachers and expect every teacher should complete it over the course of their careers. We will begin by rolling out the programme mainly to teachers in the first five years of their careers to build on their initial teacher training and induction. More experienced teachers will be trained and act as in-school coaches to teachers on the programme. We will look at how this might be recognised as part of their own Masters programme'*

(DCSF, 2008)

Whilst this, to some extent, addresses the lack of parity between experienced teachers and newly qualified staff, in terms of Masters credits, it does raise the prospect of teachers without academic credits at Level 7

coaching and developing the skills of those who already have such credits. Not only does this highlight the potential gap between experience academically versus experience within the classroom, but it also reinforces the view of Jackson, that CPD has the scope to become a thorny issue for newly qualified staff over the intervening transition period in which the proportion of school-based staff who have masters level credits could well be below that of the proportion of newly qualified staff who hold such credits.

Paradoxically, the potential for a lack of suitably qualified staff in schools to mentor recently qualified teachers becomes a serious issue when considering that it is precisely the need for quality Early Professional Development (EPD) which drives the recent move towards a MTL. For example, Michael Day (2008) suggests that, despite having 'the best recruitment in a generation, and a world class ITT programme' it is in Early Professional Development (EPD) that the quality and quantity of training 'drops off', citing only a 20% satisfaction with EPD amongst recently qualified staff. Sewell (2008:51) advises trainees that '...class-based mentors may well not make explicit links to research findings when supporting mentees...they are more likely to use their own experience and make decisions based on research they have carried out in their own classrooms'. If this is true, how can the importance of academic research be embedded within the trainee's individual school-based experience? Additionally, how can the importance of the trainee's school-based academic research be seen as holding significance by school-based mentors, particularly if, for example, the trainee's professional practice is not reaching the desired goals?

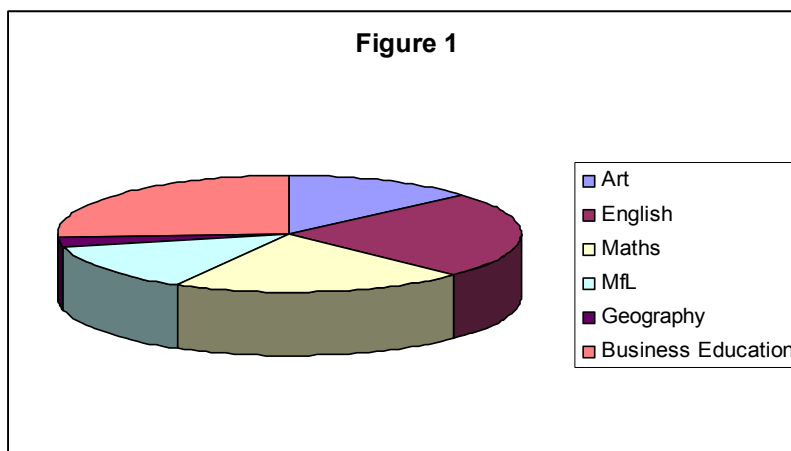
Jackson et al (2007) consider the role of value-added in the context of the M-level PGCE and raise the question of how, if at all, the M-level credits are perceived to advance and add value to the teaching profession in a broad, as well as an individual sense. They report their research findings, in which 68% of 1681 respondents reported the Masters level qualification being 'some' or 'a great deal' important to them. 68% also had the same responses to the question 'How far do you consider that studying at Masters level likely to contribute to your teaching?', both figures indicating a high level of commitment to M-level study amongst trainees about to embark on their PGCE course. 81% believed that studying theory would have a positive impact upon classroom practice and 73% thought that having Masters credits would enhance job prospects to some extent. Whilst seeming to form a highly positive view of M-ness amongst trainees early in their course, it

is prudent to recall that only 50% of trainees felt they had a good understanding of what the M-ness was 'all about'.

Against this background, the opportunity to review the opinions of trainees mid-course was exploited to form the focus of this article. As trainees gain further experience in schools and form judgements about themselves and the teaching environment, it is likely that viewpoints might shift and a new perspective on M-ness might be developed. A key focus here was to determine the extent to which trainees who had commenced their PGCE course were aware of the Masters-ness of their programme, how well they valued it and their perceptions of the impact of M-level study upon their course, school-based practice and employment opportunities.

## Methods

This study considers the views of a sample of 112 trainee teachers part way through their one-year PGCE Secondary training at training institution in the North of England. At the point when the questionnaire was issued, trainees had completed their first block placement and were about to commence their final block placement. They had already received marks for some assignments, including one for a module which carried Masters credits, and were entering the final stages of some school-based research which could also achieve Masters credits. Trainees from six subjects were questioned, the proportions of each being shown in Figure 1.



The questionnaire comprised five questions, each with sub-parts, covering personal details, educational background, experiences of the M-level programme, experiences of research and research methods, and future ambitions. The question regarding research and research methods consisted of a series of 10 statements next to which trainees were asked to rate, on a five-point scale, from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Several part-questions had only tick-box responses; however some of these invited further comment. In the question concerning future ambitions, one-part question consisted of a tick-box list from which trainees selected their career ambition in terms of type of post held. When considering whether they thought that having a Masters level PGCE would be an advantage in securing a teaching post (question 5e), it should be noted that the majority of trainees had not yet acquired a teaching post and many had not had interviews, so their response is likely to be based on the experiences of peers at interview and their own perceptions based on conversations with colleagues in schools.

Of the sample chosen, 67% were female. 56% were aged 21-25, 24% were aged 26-30 and 20% aged over 30. Seventy-nine percent defined themselves as 'white UK', with the proportions of 'white other', 'Chinese', 'Indian', 'Pakistani', Black African and 'Mixed race' being 8%, 2%, 2%, 4%, 3% and 2% respectively.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Prior awareness of M-ness of PGCE and current goals*

Of the 112 trainees surveyed, only 30 (27%) were aware of the availability of M-level credits through the PGCE course prior to enrolment. Of those that were aware, eleven stated that this had made the course more appealing; with the remaining 19 expressing that it had made the course 'neither more nor less appealing'. Together, these figures suggest that maybe less than 10% of the PGCE cohort entered the course purposefully in pursuit of M-level credits. This paints an even less optimistic view than that presented by Jackson (2007) who notes that on commencement of the course only around half of the trainees knew what the M-ness was all about.

In response to Sewell's recommendation that trainees research the various models of PGCE now available, trainees were asked whether they had carried out such research. Of the number surveyed, only 21 (19%) said they had, with typical reasons for their final choice of institution being:

‘It was near to where I live and easy to get to’

(Mathematics, female)

‘because of its reputation for teaching courses’

(Business Education, male)

Only one trainee stated a different reason, citing:

‘...level 7 opportunities’

(Modern Foreign Languages, female)

amongst her reasons.

Looking at this information together, there is a suggestion that a lack of pre-course information with regards to the M-level credits has led to trainees choosing an Institution without fully comprehending the differences in course structure, assessment and type of award. Whilst on the one hand this might, to some extent, be expected in the first year of a new course, the implications for the individual in terms of career development are sufficiently far-reaching to conclude that some trainees might have chosen a different course had they done further research.

Furthermore, if teaching is to become a Masters level profession, greater efforts may be required in ‘converting’ trainees to aim for level 7 and raise the ambition of a larger proportion of trainees to aspire towards this goal alongside gaining QTS. When asked, mid-course, at what level they thought their PGCE would be awarded, only 12% stated Level 7, 49% Level 6 and the remainder ‘not sure’. The reasons for the

responses given were mixed, and not all of the trainees who expected a Level 7 were happy with this goal. Indeed, several detailed workload as an issue:

‘I am doing the work but not optional extras due to the magnitude of the workload’

(Geography, Male)

and others cited previous assessment results as a precursor of likely future achievements:

‘I have been awarded a level 6 for all written assignments to date’

(Art & Design, Female)

‘I received level 7 in my first assignment but doubt I can achieve that level again’

(English, Female)

Together with other responses, such as:

‘I have not had time to do the additional modules’

(Modern Foreign Languages, Female)

‘not 100% sure of the criteria required’

(Business Education, Female)

the picture which emerges shows evidence of external reliance for assessment, which then becomes the trainee’s self-identity with regards to M-ness, coupled with, in some cases, a continued lack of information regarding how Masters level credits are attained. (There are no ‘additional modules’ or ‘optional extras’ in attempting to engage at level 7 in this particular Institution – rather, the piece of work is assessed at either level 6 or 7 using widely available assessment criteria).

Some responses indicated that level 7 was not valued by trainees:



‘level 7 would just be a bonus’

(Modern Foreign Languages, Female)

‘I don’t care about level 7, I have better things to do’

(English, Male)

‘... I am just interested in getting a teaching qualification’

(Modern Foreign Languages, Female)

Of the sample considered here, only three trainees were actively pursuing Level 7, with one stating:

‘Because I am sweating blood to try and get it!!’

(Mathematics, Female)

These findings run contrary to the findings of Jackson et al (2007) and raise questions: Is it the effects of a smaller sample size, or do the views of trainees change as the course progresses? If so, what factors cause the shift from viewing M-ness as important to them and how can the effect of these factors be minimised?

#### *Entry qualifications, Research experience and Future career ambitions*

Of the 22 trainees with a first or 2:1 degree classification, only two had studied at Masters level before commencing the PGCE course and five had previous experience of carrying out research and of research methodology. Of all other trainees, only one had research experience and none had studied to Masters level before. Overall, therefore, it is probably that trainees embarking on a PGCE course are likely to have limited research skills and be generally unaware of the standards expected at Level 7.

There was no link between degree classification and career ambitions, with a similar proportion of first, 2:1 and 2:2 classifications amongst those aspiring to be headteachers or in senior management positions. Similarly, there was no link between degree classification and aspiration to be a main scale teacher only.

Overall the picture appears to be one of a 'level playing field' upon entry to PGCE. Although it was slightly more likely for those with higher degree classifications to have studied research methods or studied at Masters level, the difference was not significant. Career ambitions were distributed reasonably evenly across the degree classification range.

#### *Future ambitions to study at Masters level*

Thirty-six per cent of the cohort surveyed expressed an intention to use Masters level credits from the PGCE as a starting point for an MA in Education. This figure seems high, given that only 12% of the same group thought they were likely to attain a level 7, with a further 49% being unsure of gaining such credits. 59% stated they would not wish to use any Level 7 credits attained to pursue further study and the remainder were not yet sure. With almost sixty percent of respondents showing reluctance to study further once in post, the Government's aim to encourage all teachers to take the MTL seems an ambitious goal.

Of those considering studying towards an MA in education using Masters credits from the PGCE, six wished to begin the qualification in their NQT year, fifteen within 1-2 years and nine with 3-5 years, with the remainder being unsure. If these ambitions came to be realised, only 30 of the 112 trainees surveyed (27%) would attain the Government's current goal of achieving MTL (or equivalent) within 5 years of qualifying.

Reasons given for pursuing study at M-level included:

'Teaching is a Masters level profession! I find the research helps my teaching'

(Mathematics, Female)

'I feel extra qualifications will benefit me if I wish to progress to positions of higher responsibility'

(Mathematics, Male)

'for my career I feel it will become necessary in order to progress'

(Mathematics, Male)

‘Just for the degree. Don't really know what I can gain from it’

(Modern Foreign Languages, Female)

‘I realise in the future all teachers will need an MA’

(Modern Foreign Languages, Female)

This range of viewpoints reflect a consideration amongst the cohort surveyed that teaching is intended to become an M-level profession and a perception that, as this happens, teachers who have M-level qualifications are likely to have a greater chance of advancement in their careers. Interestingly, the first trainee quoted here is one of only nine trainees from across the sample who showed a consideration that research might enhance their own practice and/or contribute towards their own professional development.

When asked if having a Masters level PGCE would be an advantage in getting a teaching post, approximately 57% of the sample agreed (as opposed to 73% in Jackson, 2007). Reasons fell in to two main categories, namely competitive edge and wider professional knowledge.

With regard to competition, typical responses included:

‘it may set me apart from other students who just have a PGCE’

(Art & Design, Female)

‘differentiates you as an applicant’

(Business Education, Female)

‘it could be an advantage if you are against someone and that is the only difference’

(Modern Foreign Languages, Female)

and such responses were particularly common amongst respondents in subjects where there is likely to be a greater degree of competition for teaching posts, such as in Art & Design.

Amongst those who did not think that having an M-level PGCE would be important, common reasons included a perceived lack of awareness amongst the school community, a greater weighting placed on skills in the classroom and even the view that:

‘potential employers may not hire you due to being more qualified i.e. more money’

(English, Female)

As indicated by Hawley (in Jackson, 2008), it is too early to determine the impact of M-level PGCE programmes and/or the MTL on recruitment procedures as both are too ‘fresh’; with the likely emergence of research and anecdotal evidence over the next 5 years or so, the soundness of the viewpoints expressed by these trainees will be most easily assessed with hindsight.

### *Trainees self-perceptions as researchers*

Thirty nine percent of respondents considered carrying out research to be an important part of the PGCE course (answering ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ to this statement). Thirty percent had the opposite view and answered negatively (‘strongly disagree’ or ‘disagree’) to the statement. Approximately equal proportions said they were enjoying (36%) or not enjoying (39%) carrying out research as part of the PGCE course, with 44% stating that the practical (school-based) aspect of the research was enjoyable.

In establishing reasons underpinning these viewpoints, 76% of the sample said they had ‘free choice of what area to research’ and 53% responded positively to the statement ‘carrying out research in schools has helped inform my own practice’, with a further 34% responding neutrally.

The vast majority (85%) of trainees responded positively when asked about the degree of guidance received from University based tutors with regards to research; by contrast only 33% of trainees responded in the same way with regards to support from school-based staff, with 43% responding neutrally. If indeed two-thirds of Curriculum Mentors are providing limited, or no, support and guidance to trainees in carrying out their research, questions must be raised over possible causes. This brings us back to the earlier discussion regarding the importance of school-based staff in EPD for new entrants and possible affective influences which limit experienced staff from engaging fully with trainees when carrying out research.

Workload issues also arose when considering M-level research based aspects of the course. Only 64% of trainees responded neutrally or better to the statement 'the research element of my course balances well against the other academic aspects of the course', and 60 % to the statement 'the research based element of my course balances well against the school based aspects of the course'. Here, an issue of potential conflict between attaining professional standards, completing work at non-Masters level and researching at Masters level simultaneously is highlighted; specifically, the divided nature of the two aspects seems to be the predominant view of in-course trainees. Sewell (2008) encourages trainees to consider the progressive nature of the Professional Standards for Teachers (TDA, 2007) and how they outline a progression route from QTS to Advanced Skills Teacher. She encourages trainees to consider the development of critical, reflective skills as a journey in which 'achieving QTS is only the very first step' on the path to becoming a 'visionary teacher' (2008:14). Bridging the cognitive gap between 'gaining QTS' and 'becoming a reflective teacher', explicitly through a 'continuum of characteristics' approach similar to that proposed by Rawding (in Sewell, 2008:13) and in the Professional Standards (TDA, 2007) offers scope for seeing Masters-ness as part of developing skill base of being a teacher, rather than as a discrete 'add-on'. Such an approach might also minimise any potential 'two-tier' divisions (Jackson, 2008) within the cohort of newly qualified staff.

## **Summary**

The evidence emerging, albeit from a small sample, provides a 'snapshot' of the views of trainees across a number of subject disciplines.

Despite being mature learners, with several years' experience studying in Higher Education, and in some cases many years' of work experience, the way in which trainees self-assess with regard to Level 7 is extrinsically linked to the judgements made by assessors in previous work. Few trainees indicated a desire to improve on previous assignment submissions, and there was little evidence of critical reflection with regard to this aspect of their performance. Seen against their performances in school which, to pass the first placement must have been based upon a critically reflective cycle of improvement, M-ness appears to be a secondary aim, if that, for most trainees. The question raised is one of aspiration – a lack of awareness of M-ness on entry to the course may have, by default, established 'gaining QTS' as the focus for the course. The goal for

future cohorts is in altering this mind-set so that 'achieving M-ness and QTS' becomes the default upon entry, and to ensure full awareness of the criteria involved.

Findings from this survey indicate that most trainees saw positive benefits to their daily practice through carrying out research and yet a sizeable minority (30%) had negative views of the importance of carrying out research during the PGCE course. Enjoyment levels were low in relation to research, and the divide between academic and school-based support was notable, with responses indicating that the school-based research is seen in the 'academic' rather than 'practice-based' domain, despite the execution and applicability of the research within the classroom situation.

The issues of confidence and limited prior experience are raised when considering the previous experiences of the trainees surveyed. Prior research experience was extremely limited and so it may not be unreasonable to conclude that 'doing research' might seem intimidating to trainees, particularly when faced also with mastering the demands of the classroom and meeting the professional standards. Indeed, the career aspirations of the cohort, with at least 62% aiming for promoted posts, do not appear to present a cohort that lacks ambition for self-development. Nevertheless, with a low proportion wishing to pursue Masters level study upon completion of the PGCE, this career ambition does not seem to sit in parallel, in the minds of the trainees, with future study. In fact, several respondents indicated that they had perceived little knowledge of M-level aspects of PGCE courses amongst school based colleagues.

There is also evidence to suggest that, of those trainees who do see M-level study as being advantageous, a very small minority consider this advantage to be in terms of developing their own teaching; the larger proportion considering it to be useful in seeking promoted posts, or that they 'might as well' if they had already gained some Level 7 credits through the PGCE. Again, it is interesting to consider whether such perceptions are formed prior to acceptance on the course, or are gained through school-based or other course-related experiences. It would be worthwhile to pursue whether exposure to a school-based colleague who has completed Masters level study has any impact upon the ambitions of trainees who work with them, and whether such trainees subsequently place a greater value on completing further study themselves.

Sewell's (2008) argument that class based mentors are more likely to draw on their own experience than the research of others may, in itself, form the starting point of a cyclical pattern in which trainees gain limited exposure to teachers with a broad overview of recent research in school-based settings and hence are less likely to value research, and pursue similar research themselves in future years. Such 'de-training' in school based settings may naturally begin to dissipate as a greater proportion of qualified staff take up the MTL, or other Masters level programmes, and newly qualified staff with Masters credits enter the workplace; this in itself is a reason for longitudinal studies to commence with the early M-level PGCE cohorts. Furthermore, as more staff carry out research into their own practice, it is likely that the quality and quantity of support for trainee teachers in pursuing their own research would be enhanced, thereby created a more positive 'collective power of professionals thinking critically will help to develop ideas at all levels' (Jones, 2008:1)

Throughout this article, the fundamental importance of studying at Masters level, and the assumed increase in reflectivity and reflexivity, has not been questioned or considered. With some evidence of a 'tick box' mentality amongst qualifying trainees, and a low rate of ambition to pursue further study, it is imperative that the benefits of Masters level study post-PGCE are both clearly identified and widely disseminated, to trainees and to schools, if the profession is to become a Masters-level profession in it's truest sense.

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